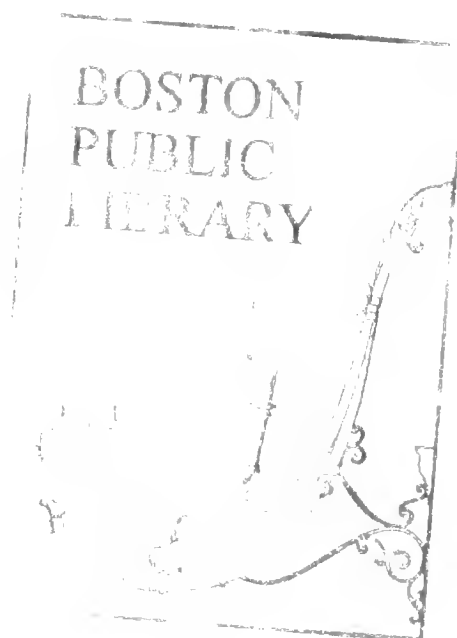


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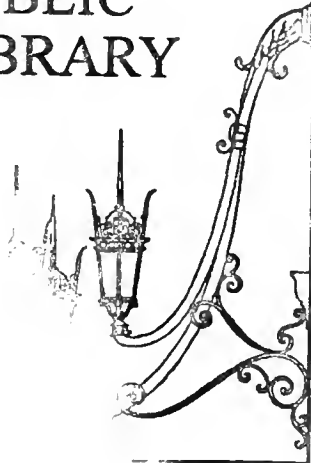
AROUND THE  
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# Around the Custom House

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# Around the Custom House

Researched and written  
by Lin Widmann

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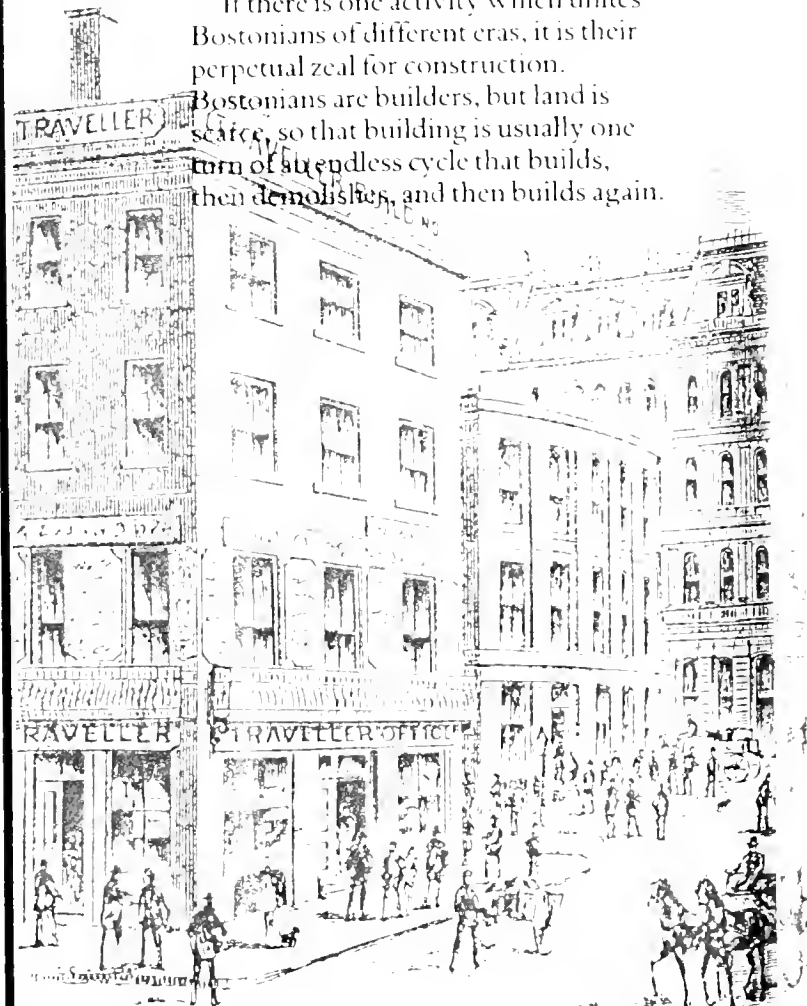
Cover illustrations from architects' elevation  
of Custom House Tower, 1910  
Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department



Boston's Custom House is one of the charmingly peculiar buildings of the world—thirty floors of "Gothic-Bureaucratic" ride piggyback on the dome and pedimented porticos of a four-faced Doric temple. Not far up State Street from the Custom House is another architectural incongruity: the eighteenth century brick State House, for long one of America's noblest buildings, crouches at the feet of a phalanx of immense glass and steel neighbors.

The Old State House and the skyscrapers, the Custom's temple and its office tower are reminders of the city's perennial efforts to find room for itself, to match its practical and aesthetic needs to the changes of time and fortune.

If there is one activity which unites Bostonians of different eras, it is their perpetual zeal for construction. Bostonians are builders, but land is scarce, so that building is usually one turn of a endless cycle that builds, then demolishes, and then builds again.









The Old State House.

View at head of State Street.

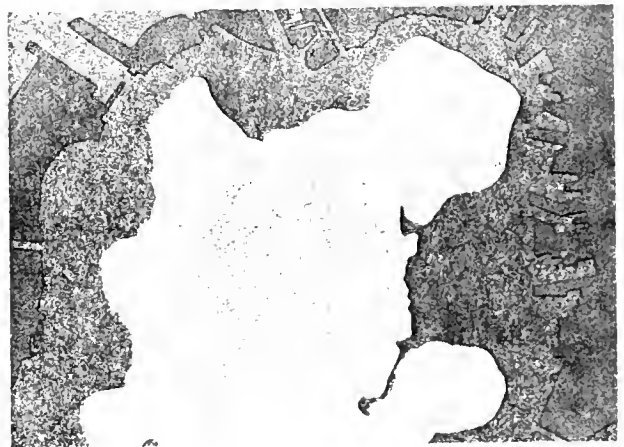
Courtesy of the Boston Public Library





Sometimes a structure like the Old State House (which in the 1870's escaped the wreckers' sledgehammer at the eleventh hour), endears itself to so many generations that its practical drawbacks come to be regarded as charming eccentricities. Often, difficult and delicate choices have to be made between the prerogatives of the present and the heritage of the past. Occasionally, this dilemma has been resolved by destiny. Boston's history is full of great fires that have burned entire districts flat.

If John Winthrop could again walk the streets of the city he founded in 1630, he would be hard pressed to find a single familiar spot—not so much because the little settlement has grown into a large metropolis, or because early Boston's rural charms have succumbed to concrete and high tech construction—but because much of what Winthrop knew as water is now solid land. When Bostonians ran out of real estate, they simply encroached on their harbor and made some more.

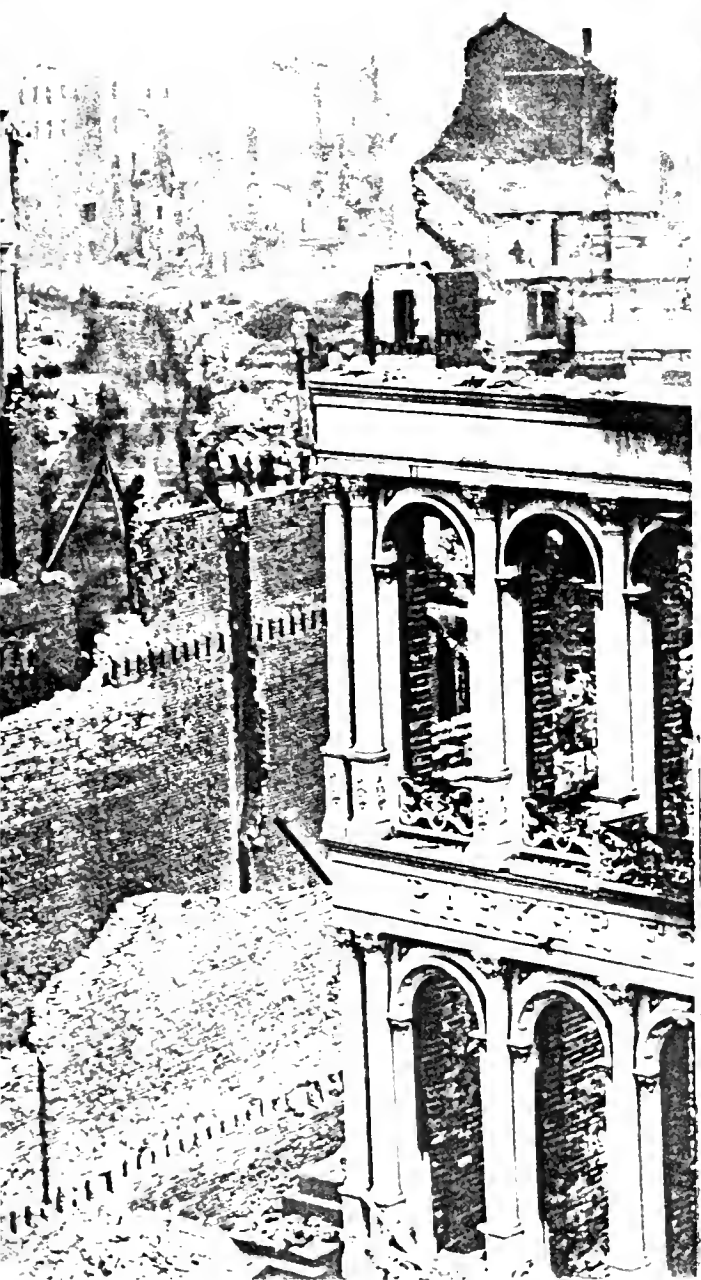


Boston, old and new

r The Fire of 1872

Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department









No major city in the United States has changed its physical face more than Boston. The very hills that rose behind Winthrop's settlement have been, over the centuries, shoveled up and carted to the shoreline to fill in extra land for ever larger numbers of Bostonians and their business. Poor William Thurston, in 1805, literally had the ground cut out from under his mansion on Beacon Hill.

From early on, Bostonians have been impatient with the way Mother Nature left their harbor. And nowhere was there more coastline tinkering than around King Street (re-named State Street after the Revolution), early Boston's main commercial artery, its roadway from the State House to the harbor and the outside world. Winthrop lived on old King Street, but in his day fish, not traffic, swarmed over its lower reaches and over much of today's adjacent Custom House district.

"Boston from Willis' Creek" by William Pierrie, 1775.  
Courtesy of the Boston Athenaeum









Long before it had completed its first century, Boston was a thriving community of sailors and merchants. By 1710, the need for deep anchorage prompted the extension of King Street half a mile into the water with the erection of Long Wharf. The largest vessels of the day could now be directly loaded and unloaded. For seventy-five years, Long Wharf helped Boston retain its position as America's busiest port until the town was overtaken by New York in the 1850's.

When the century turned, Boston had survived the Revolution and the depression caused by the closure of the ports of the British Commonwealth to American ships. But as a result of its new trade with Russia, the Indies and the Far East, the city was soon enjoying a fresh period of prosperity.

By 1803 the China trade was generating such profit, that "distinguished developer" Uriah Cotting persuaded four other Bostonians, including Francis Cabot Lowell, to join him in a vast enterprise.

r Long Wharf buildings Nos. 12 and 13, 1903.  
Courtesy of the Society for the Preservation  
of New England Antiquities



Long Wharf and Central Wharf  
by Robert Salmon, 1833.

Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department

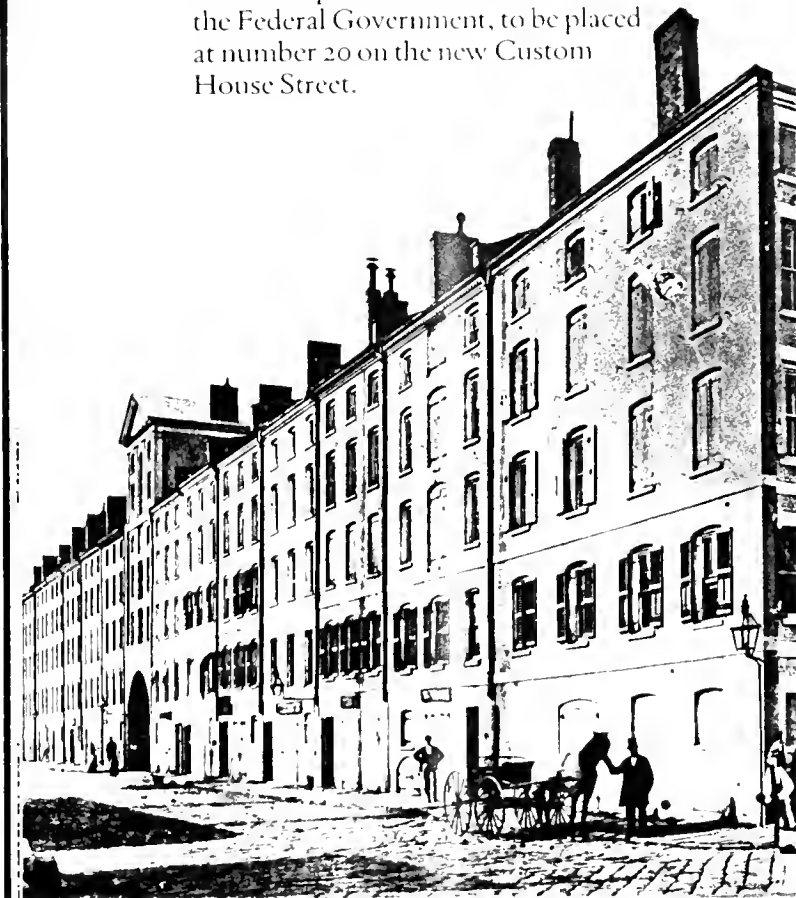




They engaged Boston's most eminent architect, Charles Bulfinch, to help them replace the ramshackle piers and zig-zag wharves in the swamps just south of Long Wharf into a commercial area that would give investors a share in maritime trading profits. This launched two decades of ambitious and difficult construction which would turn the district into the heart of Boston commerce.

Bulfinch's India Wharf pushed the shoreline further out into the town cove and allowed for more than half a mile of warehouses and stores along a new deep-water wharf. New streets were laid out, with Broad, India, Franklin, and Custom House among them.

By 1807, India Wharf was complete—but the restraints of the Jefferson embargo brought bankruptcy to Uriah Cotting. However, by 1810 he was sufficiently recovered to design and finance a spacious Custom House for the Federal Government, to be placed at number 20 on the new Custom House Street.



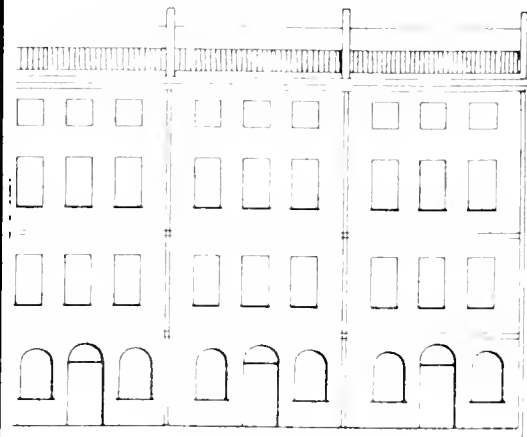


The construction of yet another wharf, Central, began in 1816. With this the last phase of the Bulfinch master plan for the area was complete, and another fifty-four warehouses were built. Shubael Bell, the senior Warden of Christ Church, described Central Wharf in a letter to a friend in 1817:

"The completion of this undertaking unparalleled in commercial History, is a proof of the enterprize, the wealth, and persevering Industry of Bostonians . . . From an octagon cupola over the pediments, you have a charming view of the Harbour and neighboring towns . . ."

Broad Street, India Wharf and Central Wharf were all built in Bulfinch's Federal style. The structures were of brick arranged in Flemish bond style, with low-pitched, hipped roofs, stone window sills and symmetrical window patterns. They were usually four stories high and three windows wide.

By 1820, when the China trade was beginning to falter, the textile and shoe business carried Boston forward. Francis Cabot Lowell had revolutionized the process of turning cotton into cloth with a new power loom, which he developed in one of Bulfinch's new warehouses, 64 Broad Street.



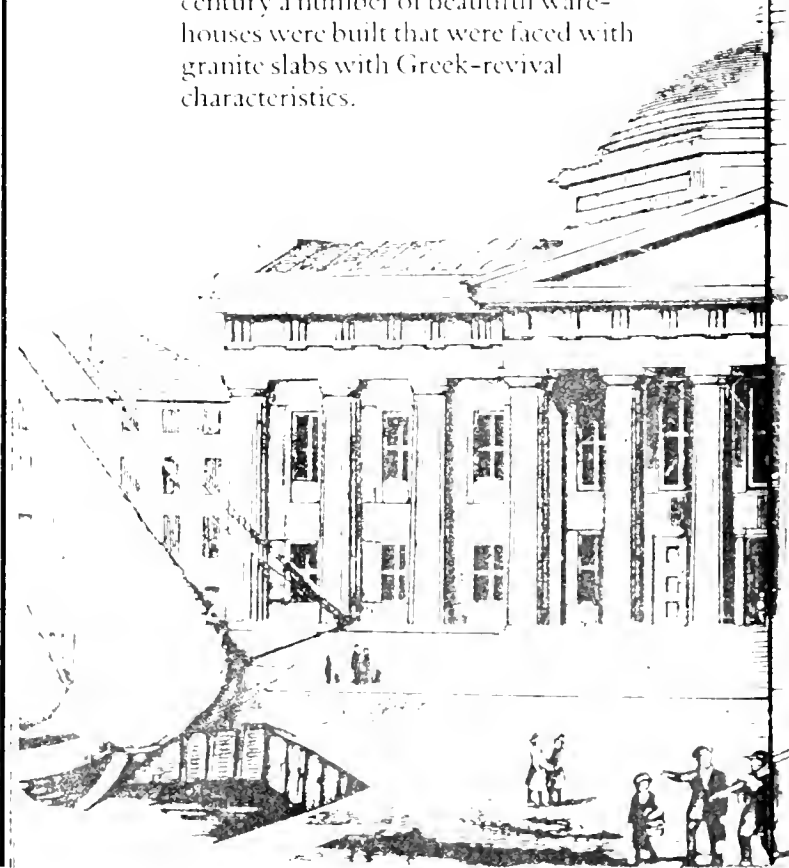
Central Wharf, c. 1870.

Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Print Department



In 1824, the new Greek-inspired, granite buildings of Josiah Quincy's market appeared on the waterfront. Ten years later, with Ammi Young's new Custom House, Greek-revival arrived in the thriving business area south of Long Wharf. It was built to replace the original Coting Custom House, which was already inadequate for the huge volume of goods—textiles, timber, rum, hides and chocolate—that were passing through the port. Walt Whitman described the new Custom House as "one of the noblest pieces of commercial architecture in the world."

Like the Bulfinch project, the building of the new colonnaded granite Custom House with its saucer dome was a considerable technological feat. It rested on three thousand piles and the foundations alone took three years to lay; it was only completed in 1847. Granite became a favorite building material, and around the middle of the century a number of beautiful warehouses were built that were faced with granite slabs with Greek-revival characteristics.





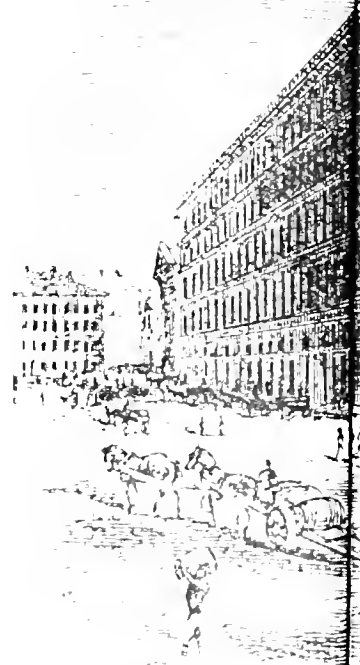




The Custom House didn't enjoy its full glory long, for in 1858 it lost its waterfront position to the State Street Block. This massive building brought both the scale and ornament of the Renaissance into the Custom House district—and dwarfed its Federal and Greek-revival neighbors.

Sheer size, however, was not enough to save anything from fading fortunes of the harbor. By mid-century, competition from New York and the development of railway transportation were already pushing Boston Harbor into decline. In 1866, the city began an ill-starred effort to revive its seaport by connecting its wharves to the railways. Fort Hill provided the earth to fill in a broad new avenue. But Atlantic Avenue, that cut across the mouth of the original town cove, only succeeded in bisecting the wharves and in isolating the waterfront from its market place. The Avenue crashed through the middle of Bulfinch's development, destroying half of India Wharf. It even sliced off a piece of the newly built State Street Block and, in the end, served the wharves a fatal blow.

State Street Block.  
Courtesy of the Boston  
Public Library







The Great Fire of 1872, which raged for two long November days, levelled much of the financial district next door but spared the Custom House area. The reconstruction of the financial district then triggered new building around the Custom House. They were mostly offices or factories for light manufacturing. The cast-iron facade of the Richards Building, imported from Italy, was completed in 1867, and at 43 Broad Street Carl Fehmer produced a fine example of High Victorian Gothic. The Chadwick Lead Works turned out ammunition from a new building ornamented with "grotesques," gargoyles and arched Romanesque windows.



The Richards Building,  
114 State Street







During the Belle Époque, in the three decades after 1880, an array of different styles and tastes flourished around the Custom House; the coronetted Flour and Grain Exchange, the intricately ornamented Board of Trade. And in 1902, Peabody & Stearns designed a building decorated with anchors and nautical symbols for the Cunard Steamship Company.

By 1913, the federally-owned Custom House had outgrown its Greek temple (after only 66 years); and since a Federal building was exempt from the 125-foot height restriction, Peabody & Stearns were able to cap the Custom House dome with a 490-foot tower, presenting New England with its first skyscraper. The Custom House remained the highest structure in Boston until it was topped, in 1949, by the John Hancock Building.



Cunard Building on State Street

r. The Custom House  
Courtesy of the Boston Public Library,  
Print Department







Nearly two centuries of intense business activity have left the Custom House district with a rich variety of buildings. The Bulfinch warehouses are the oldest, the Batterymarch 1927 Art Deco skyscraper is the newest; the romanesque Flour and Grain Exchange is probably the most exuberant, the cast-iron Richards Building certainly the rarest, and the Custom House hybrid surely the strangest and most appealing.

There has been no new building in the district for sixty years. But there have been changes. The expressway cut straight through the Wharf buildings that had survived Atlantic Avenue, and in 1962 a wave of urban destruction felled the elegant remnants of the old India Wharf.

The Custom House Historic District was established by the National Park Service in 1973 and is now listed in the National Register of Historic Places. On the street that housed the original Custom House, Jaymont Properties and award-winning architects Bruner Cott & Associates, will bring to the district a new vitality.



Batterymarch Building,  
illustrating variegated masonry work.







Sensitive to the concerns of the Boston Landmarks Commission, Boston Preservation Alliance and Boston Redevelopment Authority, Bruner Cott designed two buildings in a style that belongs to the nineteen eighties—with height, scale and materials harking back to older neighbors.

Roof lines and floor-to-floor heights will match the mid-rise early twentieth century structures in the area. The use of granite for the "skin" of the buildings will echo the adjoining Flour and Grain Exchange. Three 1806 Bulfinch warehouses will be completely and accurately restored with the help of original Bulfinch drawings. And Custom House Street will be embellished with wide brick sidewalks, benches, and shade trees.

One of the two new office buildings will stand on the exact site—number 20 Custom House Street—where Cotting placed his original structure. That venerable building was demolished in the early 1930's to make way for a garage that was again demolished. When the vital cycle is completed again, a granite lintel above the entrance of number 20 will serve to remind Bostonians and visitors of Uriah Cotting and his venerable old Custom House.



Artist's rendering of new Custom House District





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